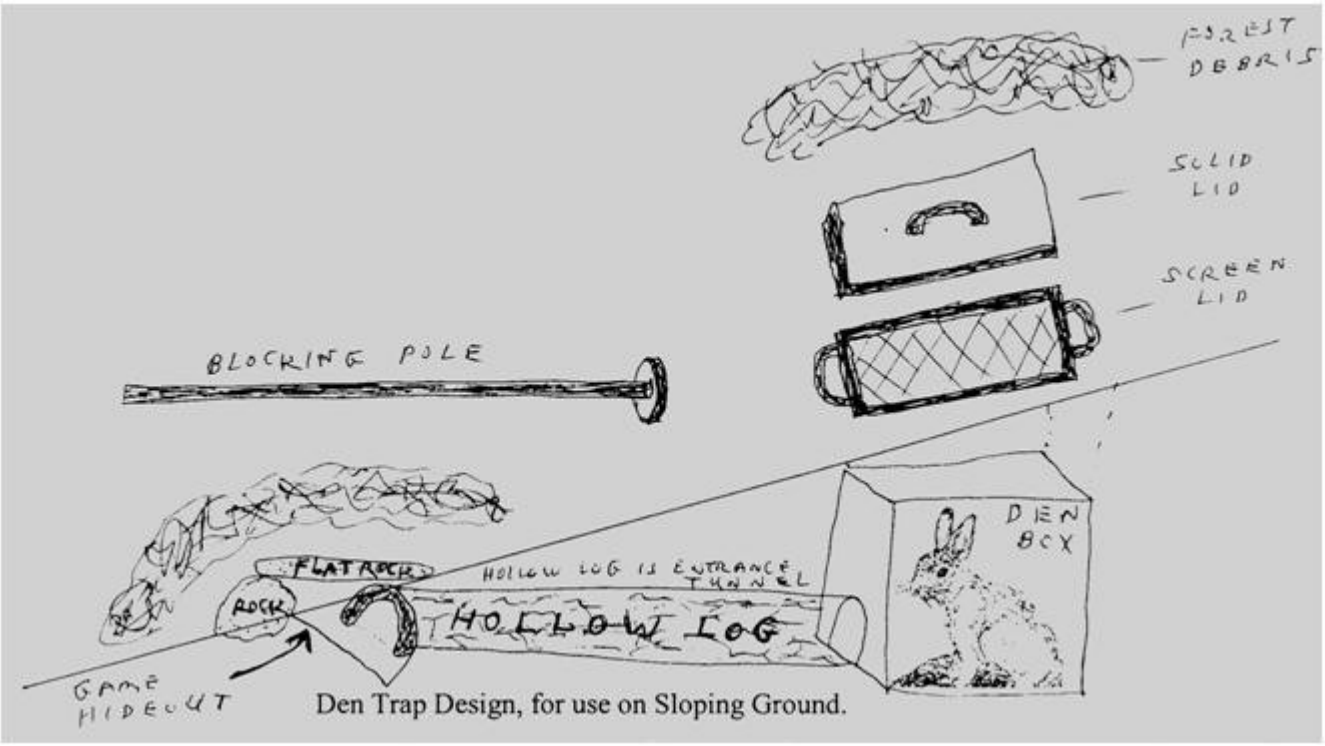
How To Make Den Traps:

Knowing how to make and use den traps may very well be the most important survival skill you ever acquire. Once you grasp this concept, you will have the ability to provide fresh meat for yourself, friends, and family, for the rest of your life. So, what is a den trap? Den Traps are the best permanent trap design ever invented. A den trap is simply an artificial den or burrow, built to shelter wild game animals until you are ready to harvest them.

A Den Trap has many advantages over any other type of trap. The trap is permanent, and will provide you with game for years, or even decades. It will catch many different types of game, and no bait is required. It is always set; one animal going in will not lock others out, so you can catch several animals at once, and may even catch different types of game at the same time. It will work all year, and in all weather conditions. In fact, bad weather prompts game to shelter in these traps, so they will produce game when other trap designs will not.

Any other type of trap must be checked often, to see if it has been sprung, and animals must be processed right away, when killed in a snare (or other killing-type trap), or taken care of, once caught in a live-catch type trap. With den traps, game animals actually take care of themselves until you wish to harvest them for food. You can ignore a den trap for weeks or months, and no game will die in the trap.



Den Trap Design, for use on Sloping Ground.

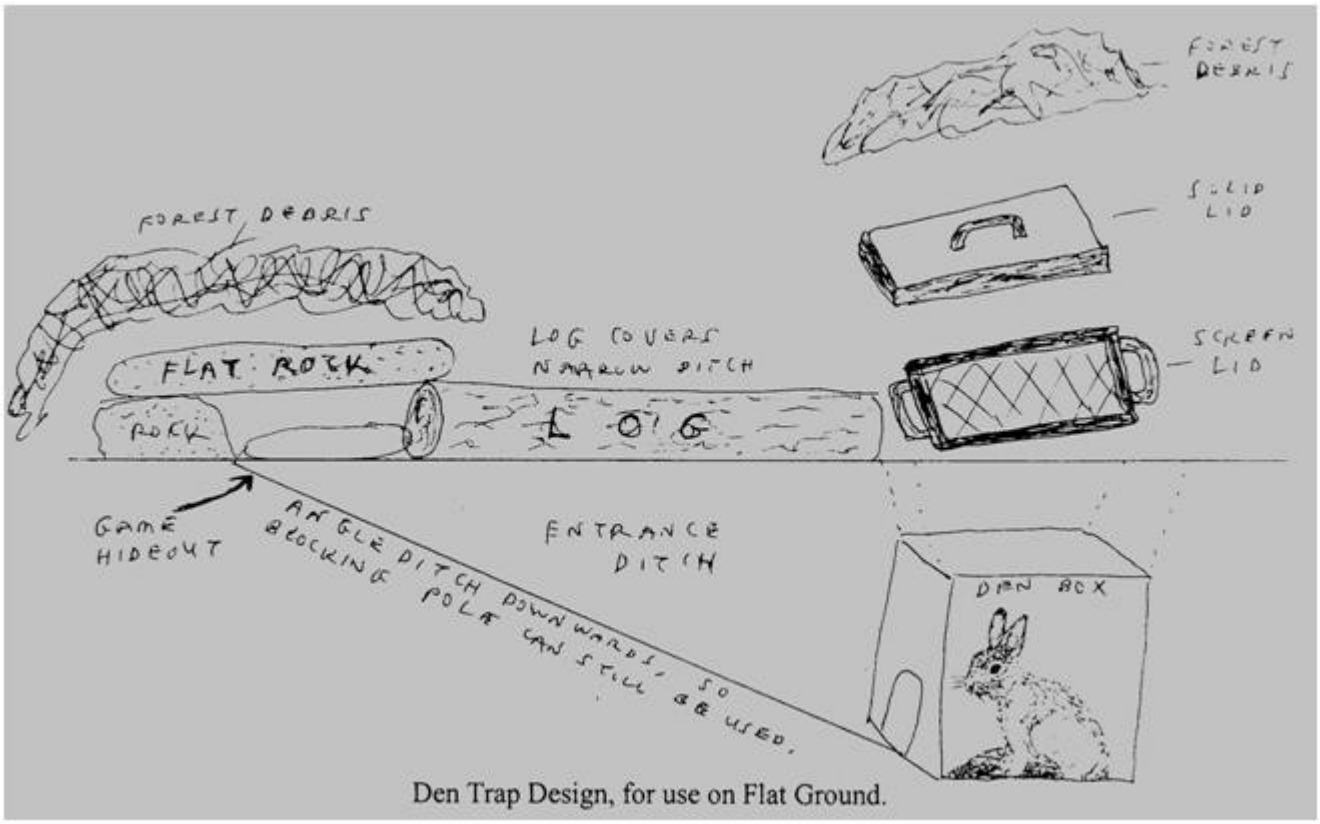
Some animals dig their own dens, but most will happily adopt any type of shelter they can find. There is always a housing shortage in the wilds, and very few places are as suitable as your den trap will be, so animals will benefit in several ways when you build these traps. A game hideout at the entrance to the den trap provides a perfect hiding place with overhead cover, and game can enter and exit the hideout from two different directions. The trap provides shelter from both predators and the elements, allowing more young game to survive, so you will actually be boosting game population in every area that you build den traps.

From my long-term survival perspective, den traps are great for several more reasons. Since they are hidden from view, no one will know that trapping is going on, making them perfect for use in areas such as public lands. The underground version of the trap is hard to spot, making it unlikely that your game will be stolen, or your trap destroyed. This trap can be made in many different variations, using scrounged items or trash, or built completely out of natural materials. It can even be scaled up to catch larger game, such as coyotes.

No other trap offers the advantages that this one does. A few installed around your location will be available to collect game from, for many years in the future. They can also be made now, and placed in an area that you may want to stay at later, and will be ready to provide you with food when you arrive. Den Traps could be installed at every location that you like to visit or camp, helping the game to flourish in each area you have chosen. This allows you to move from location to location, while having a supply of fresh food waiting for you at each stop.

Now you are probably wondering if Den Traps have any disadvantages, and of course they do, as any design has some "engineering trade-offs". These are permanent traps, so they are not portable (but you can build them wherever they are needed). They take a certain amount of time and effort to construct, which varies with the exact style of trap you choose to make. Once finished, it also takes some time for local game to find these traps, get used to them, and start using them, so you don't set them up quickly, like wire snares, or cable-lock deer snares, and expect to have game trapped the next morning. But aside from these few drawbacks, there is no better permanent trap, for long-term survival.

In fact, the longer this type of trap is in place, the better it works, as more game in the area locate your dens and move in. And although it isn't required, you can shorten the time it takes game to find and use your dens, by putting some bait (such as a sardine, minnows, dry dog food, or a dab of peanut butter) in the game hideout at the entrance to each den every day for a few days, to help animals locate and get used to their new housing.



Den Trap Design, for use on Flat Ground.

Construction: There are many different ways to make these traps, but all share some similarities. A den trap consists of four basic parts; a den box with a removable lid, an entrance tunnel, a game hideout at the entrance, and a blocking pole (which is used to prevent game from escaping, when you go to collect them from the den). You can use many different materials for each of these parts, and you may think up your own unique variations.

There are three basic styles of Den Traps; above-ground traps, sunken traps, and underground traps. The above-ground style is the easiest to build, but it is also the easiest for other people to find. The underground style is just the opposite, harder to build, but also harder to locate. The sunken style is half-buried, so it splits the difference between the other two styles. First, we will describe how to make an above-ground Den Trap.

Above-Ground Den Trap:

The Den: You can make all of your den boxes from scratch, using lumber or plywood, but I seldom use this method, because I prefer to improvise. I like to make my dens out of locally available materials, so if I am in a wooded area with lots of sticks and tree limbs, I will build a den box out of sticks, like a miniature log cabin.

If I am in a rocky area, I make a den box by stacking up stones to make the walls, like a little stone house.

If I am out in a grassy area, where materials are scarce, I make the den box using squares of grassy sod dug up with a shovel, or mud bricks (made by mixing mud and grass), like a small adobe building.

I prefer to make the top of adobe dens from sticks or scrap lumber, or pieces of plywood or corrugated roofing, if any of these are available. You can make a sod roof, using a shape like an igloo, or skep beehive, but it may collapse in wet weather. Stick roofs can be improved by covering them with some plastic, for waterproofing, if you have any. A den that stays warm and dry is a den that catches more game.

If I am near a junkyard, or other source of man-made materials, I use whatever looks suitable. The den box can be made from any suitably sized wooden or metal box, a five gallon bucket with lid, a plastic storage tub, an old trash can, a large flower pot, or even a large section of hollow log, or hollow stump. Your den only needs to be big enough for several game animals to fit inside, so den boxes can be as small as 12 inches square, but 18 inches is better, and 24 inches on each side is very roomy, by den standards.

Dens can be made round, square, or rectangular, as desired. Twelve inches is a good standard height for any den box, as few small game animals stand over one foot high. If you want to trap coyotes, you will have to make larger dens (3 by 3 feet).

The top of your den box should be open, or have an opening built or cut into it, which is large enough for you to reach into, so that you can remove game from the trap. The top (or the opening) is covered with one or two lids, an (optional) screen lid, which allows you to see into the den without letting game escape, and a solid lid, which closes the den, and keeps out sunlight.

The solid lid will be covered with a layer of leaves or forest debris, to hide the trap, and to help keep the den dark (because game will not stay in a den, if sunlight shines into it). The game hideout also helps to keep direct sunlight out of the entrance tunnel, and den box. The den box also needs an opening on one side, to connect to the entrance tunnel.

The solid lid can be made from a variety of materials, just like the other trap parts. Again, I tend to use whatever is handy, where I happen to be. A lid can be made by lashing sticks together, or it can be a large, thin, flat rock. Scrap plywood makes a good lid, or scrap lumber can be nailed together to make one. A piece of corrugated roofing works ok, and old metal or plastic trash can lids make good den box lids. (Wow, lids make good lids!)

The solid lid should be larger than the opening it covers, to help seal out rain and sunlight. I like to put two handles on my lid, to make it easy to lift up when checking the trap, as the lid will be covered with leaves. The handles can be made from rope, cordage, nylon strapping, or wire, or you can use old screen door handles.

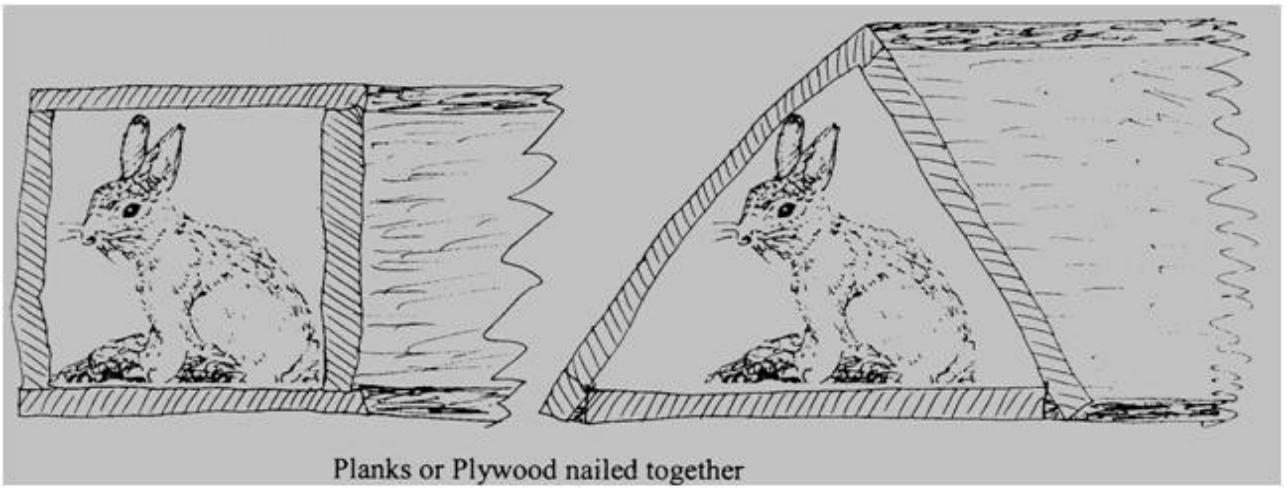
The Entrance Tunnel: Entrance tunnels are the way the game gets into the den box. You just need a tunnel about four feet long, and big enough for your game to fit inside; six inches across is good for small game, twelve will do for the largest possums and raccoons, and eighteen inches will work for coyotes. Again, I like to use locally available materials.

In wooded areas, lay two four-foot long small logs down, the right distance apart. Put a third log on top of these two, so that it bridges the gap, and you have a tunnel. The logs can be flattened on the inside, if you want, to make a smoother tunnel.

In rocky areas I make two lines of stones, the right distance apart, and place flat stones across the gap, to create the tunnel.

In grassy plains areas, I use lines of sod or adobe bricks, but I use a plank for the top of the tunnel, so that it won't cave in when it rains.

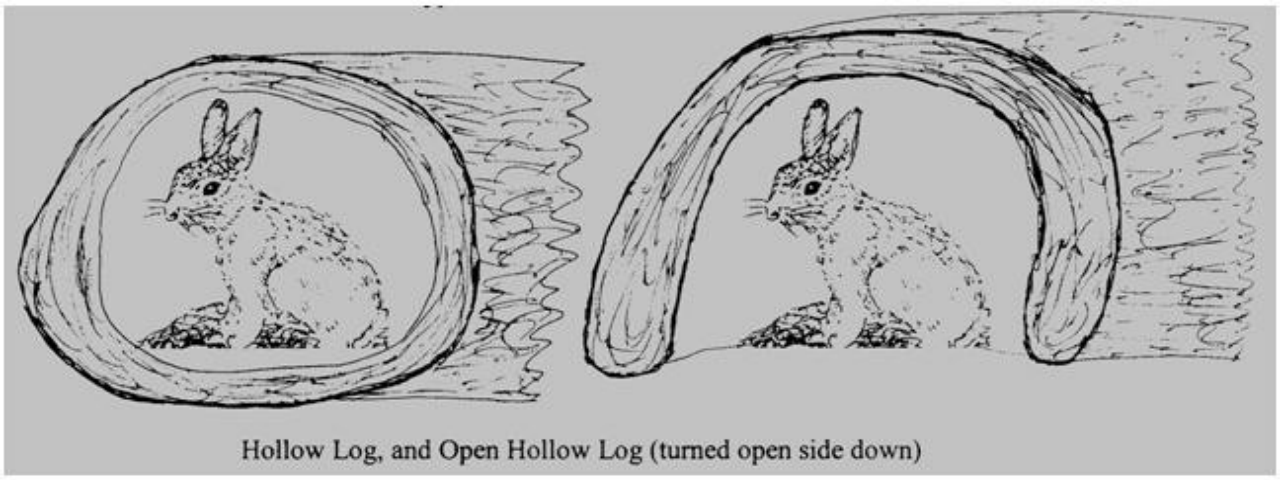
When man-made materials are available, you have a number of options. Tunnels can be made from planks or plywood nailed together, to form hollow square columns (or hollow triangular columns). You can also use old plastic or metal pipe, metal or concrete culverts, old bricks or cinder blocks, or even old drain tiles, roofing gutters, or downspouts. You could also use several large cans or buckets wired together, with the ends cut out.



Planks or Plywood nailed together

The entrance tunnel fits up against the opening in the side of the den box, so that animals can crawl through the tunnel, and enter the den.

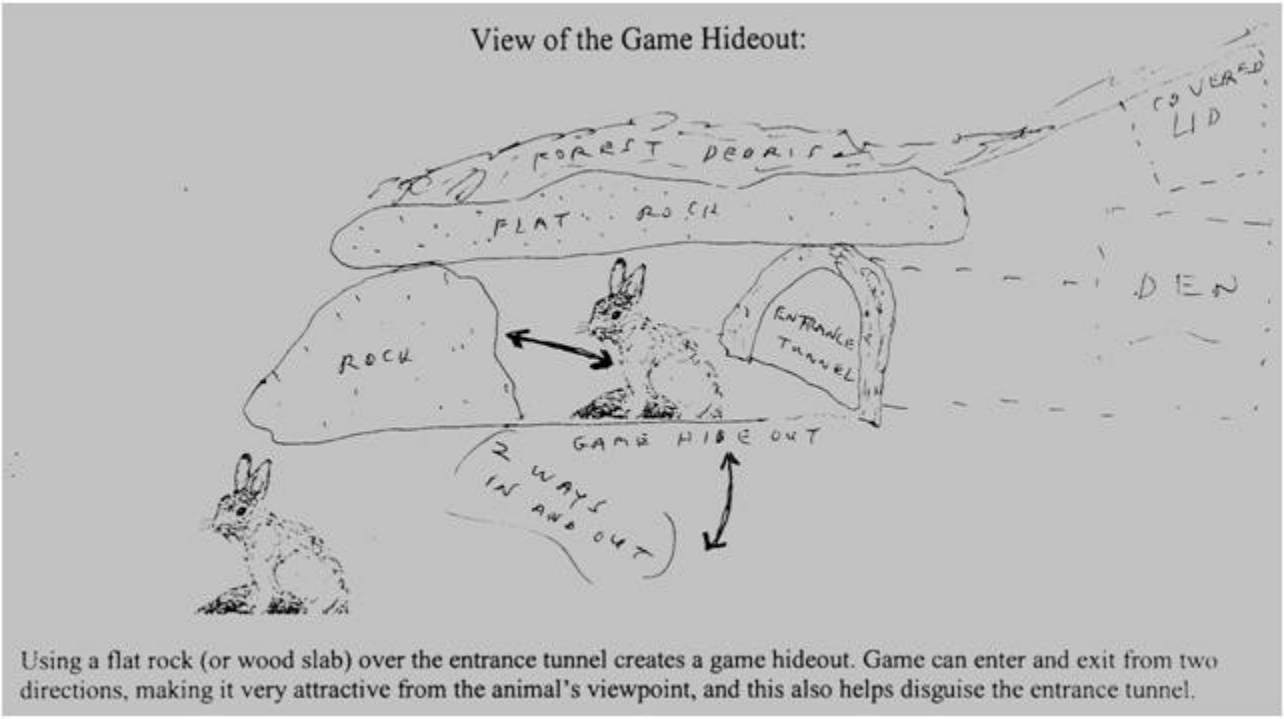
My favorite entrance tunnels are made from hollow logs that I cut into four-foot long sections, or hollow logs that are open on one side (you just put the open side down, and this is also how you use rain gutters). I am always looking around for more hollow logs, which I cut up into sections, and save for my next batch of den traps.



Hollow Log, and Open Hollow Log (turned open side down)

These logs often have rotted wood inside, which needs to be cleaned out, using an axe and adze for open logs, or a spud (a large debarking chisel on a pole) for enclosed hollow logs. You can often knock the rotted wood out with just a length of metal pipe and a hammer. If you don't have any tools, you can always burn them out using campfire coals, if you are careful (keep water on hand to douse the flames, as needed).

The Game Hideout: When you have made your den and entrance tunnel, find a rock (or short section of log), and put it a foot or so in front of the entrance tunnel. Now find a flat rock, or slab of wood, and place it so that it bridges over from the entrance tunnel to the first rock. This creates a little game hideout where animals can stay hidden, and be protected from overhead attacks by birds of prey. They can also come and go from either side, so animals will feel like they have an escape route, as well as being able to retreat down the entrance tunnel.



Using a flat rock (or wood slab) over the entrance tunnel creates a game hideout. Game can enter and exit from two directions, making it very attractive from the animal's viewpoint, and this also helps disguise the entrance tunnel.

Game animals will consider this to be a perfect arrangement, and will be drawn to live here as soon as they find the den. Now cover the flat rock with leaves or forest duff, to help it blend in. The hideout can be further disguised by grass, brush, or other rocks, as desired.

The Blocking Pole: A blocking pole is just a stick, limb, pole, or pipe which is longer than the entrance tunnel, and has a block of wood fastened on one end, the right size and shape to block the tunnel. To use, you insert the pole (block end first) into the tunnel, until the block is up against the opening of the den box. This requires you to temporarily remove the game hideout cover first, and usually the rock in front of the entrance as well.

The blocking pole will seal the den, so that game can't escape, and if any game happened to be inside the entrance tunnel, it will drive them back into the den. To keep the block from going past the tunnel and into the den, make the entrance hole on the side of the den box a little smaller than the entrance tunnel, or you can put a couple of nails at the end of the tunnel as a stop, if it is made from wood.

Once you have constructed your above-ground den trap, and made sure that the blocking pole will fit into the entrance tunnel properly, then the trap should be covered with a thick layer of leaves and forest debris, to insulate it, disguise it, and to seal out sunlight from any gaps.

You can also make the walls of the den box and tunnel thicker, if made from sod or stones, or chink stones with a mixture of mud and grass, if you want, or cover the exterior with a piece of old plastic or canvas before adding leaves, or you can cover the trap with a layer of dirt (an earth berm), before adding forest debris, to help block out light. Any of these techniques work ok, so pick one.

Extra insulation is especially important in northern locations, with severe winters.

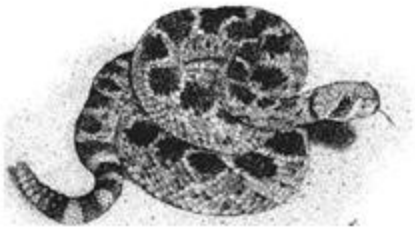
Where To Locate Den Traps: The best locations for den traps are alongside existing game trails, and close to year-round streams or water holes, where game goes to drink and find food. So install your den traps where the game already travels, preferably in a well-drained and gently sloping location, and above any possible flooding, as you don't want your dens to fill up with water. In swampy areas you will have to use the highest ground available, even if it is not ideal, so look for any small hills or ridges that may be in the area.

Almost any animal that can fit into the entrance tunnel will use your den, both meat animals and furbearing game. Yet another advantage to den traps is that most animals are nocturnal, so you can check your traps during the day when it is convenient, and the game will be sleeping away inside. No more having to get up at the crack of dawn, to check your trap lines before your catch is spoiled, eaten by predators, or stolen by trapline thieves.

Harvesting game: So you made some den traps, and then waited a few weeks for animals to take up residence. When you are ready to collect your game, you remove the flat rock (or wood slab) that makes up the top of the game hideout (and the rock in front of the entrance tunnel, if necessary). Insert the blocking pole into the tunnel, until the block is up against the den entrance. Now dig around in the leaves and forest debris above the den box, until you find the rope or wire handles that you made.

Lift up gently, to remove the solid lid (with the mat of debris still intact on top of it), and then you can inspect your catch. The mat of forest debris tends to compact into a solid mass of compost over time, making it easy to remove and replace the lid, without having to clear away the leafy cover first. You can also tie the debris to the lid with string or fishing line, in a simple net pattern, and then add a bit more debris, to conceal the cordage. (The Viet Cong sometimes glued leaves to the trap doors of their tunnel hideouts, so they wouldn't fall off.)

Screen Lids: The screen lid is optional, as game often will not even try to escape, but will cower in the den long enough for you to make a decision, but you want to inspect the den carefully before actually reaching inside, because you may find rattlesnakes or skunks in your trap. I like to use screen lids, as I find that they keep me from feeling rushed. Also, any technique that helps you avoid losing food will be worth using in a famine, or any true long-term survival scenario.



Inspect den traps carefully before reaching inside, as they also catch snakes and skunks.

If you opt for a screen lid, there are many different ways to make one (Hey, I see a pattern here!) A screen lid can be a simple wooden frame, covered by chicken wire, window screen, hardware cloth, or expanded metal.

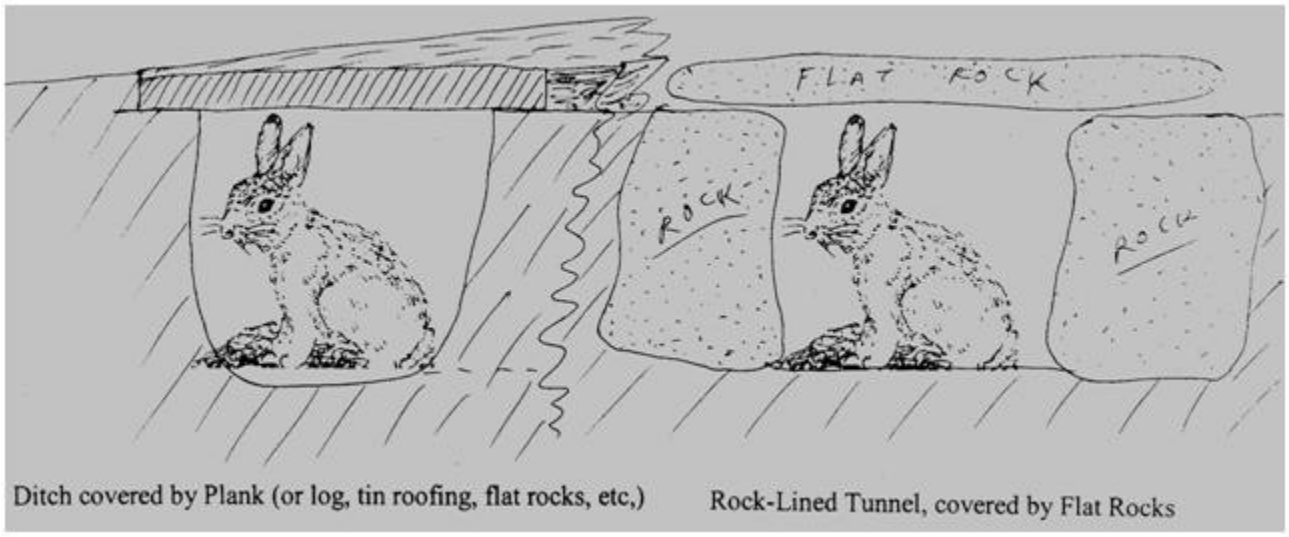
I usually make my screens from sticks or bamboo lashed together into an open lattice, because I like to make things out of sticks, and sticks are easy to collect for free. The screen allows you to see what you caught, without letting any game jump out, so you can decide if you want to collect or shoot your catch at your leisure.

Since den traps are live-catch traps, captured game can be removed unharmed, if desired, so you can use them as livestock, or as trade goods, or you can fatten them up in cages before eating them (possums and raccoons are much better eating after they have been fattened up on kitchen scraps first). Predators and nuisance animals (such as skunks) should be killed, to reduce their numbers in the local area.

Sunken Den Traps, and Underground Den Traps:

The sunken versions of den traps are similar to the above-ground traps, except the den box is installed in a hole in the ground. Sunken dens can be from half-buried, to deep enough that the top is flush with the ground level. This reduces the visibility profile of the trap. Underground den traps are set deep enough that the top of the den box is below ground level (10 to 12 inches lower), allowing them to be completely concealed from view.

Since these styles of trap are set in the ground to one degree or another, the entrance tunnels must be placed in slanted ditches, so that they run from the game hideout on the surface, to the opening in the side of the den box, which will be below ground level. The entrance tunnel can be as simple as a narrow ditch, covered by a log, plank, flat rocks, or old corrugated tin, if the soil is stable enough to prevent cave-ins. More durable entrance tunnels, which are required in soft or sandy soils, can be made from the hollow logs I like, or any of the other methods already mentioned for above-ground traps.



Ditch covered by Plank (or log, tin roofing, flat rocks, etc.) Rock-Lined Tunnel, covered by Flat Rocks

In fact, if the ground is hard enough (such as hardpan, clay, or rock-filled soil), the den “box” can be a simple hole, but the entrance hole (at the den box end of the entrance tunnel) should be made smaller than the tunnel, using rocks or wooden stakes, to provide a stop for the blocking pole.

One other advantage to the sunken and underground designs is that, since the entrance tunnel slopes downwards, the end of the blocking pole will be elevated, and so it usually fits over the rock in front of the entrance tunnel, meaning that you only have to remove the overhead cover stone from the game hideout, to insert the blocking pole into the entrance tunnel.

I prefer to make the underground style of den trap, whenever circumstances permit, but it is easier to make above-ground den traps, if you don’t have any tools. This is one of the reasons that my caches, vehicle kits, bugout kits, and survival kits contain army surplus entrenching shovels, small pickaxes, and saws and hatchets. You can improvise digging sticks, but having good tools available makes the construction process much easier.

Once you make one of these traps, you will see for yourself just how well they work. If you build a test trap close to your home on your property, you could also install a small security camera with infrared night vision capability, inside the den box, and wire it to a remote monitor. This would let you see when animals are in the trap, if you have the equipment available, and you feel like going to the effort.

Please note that, like everything else fun and useful, making and using these traps could be illegal, or could become illegal, as new laws are passed. Use discretion, and use this information for survival situations only.